

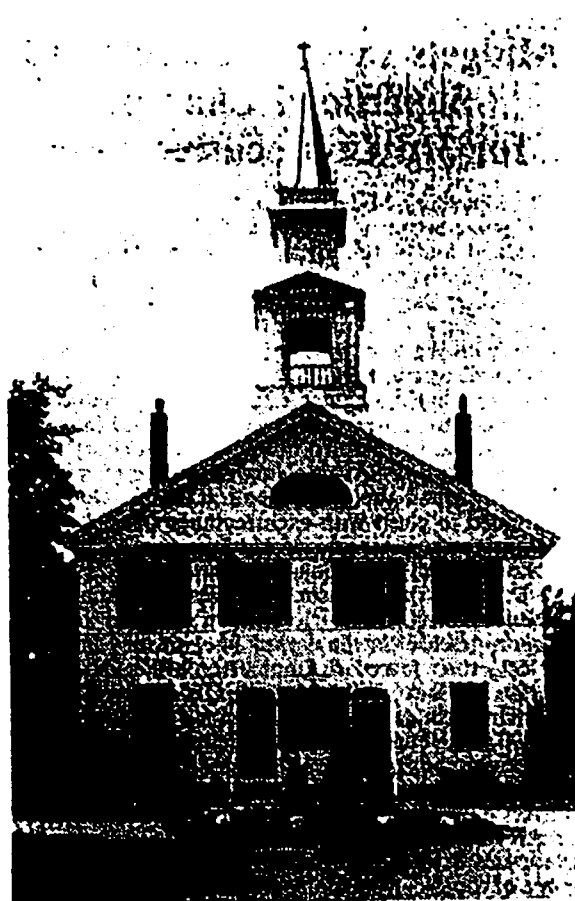
St. John's Episcopal Church

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

St. John's Episcopal Church building is the unchallenged oldest church building in Duxbury. There is also no available evidence that can prove it not to be also the oldest building in public use in town. There are many older buildings, the Hunt House on Dead Man's curve dated 1641, the custodian's cottage on the C.F. Eaton property and there are a dozen or so dwellings, some far back from the seashore that were dateboarded as far as the late 1600s. St. John's was built as a Methodist Church in 1823. At the time of its building, Duxbury was approaching the crest of a wave that would carry it to its peak as the greatest ship-building center on the Atlantic coast. St. John's construction bears the marks of the craftsmanship that constituted the hallmark of Duxbury ships all over the world.

It was probably built by shipwrights. In fact, it was one of Duxbury's most noteworthy shipbuilders who gave the land on which it stands, Seth Sprague. St. John's construction bears a strong resemblance to Duxbury's most prestigious church building, the Unitarian Church on Tremont St., built along with the "Old Town Hall" and the Partridge Academy building (now burned and replaced by Duxbury town offices) in the early 1840s. These shipwrights built well. Their ships were known across the globe for their sturdiness and seaworthiness. They were built to withstand gale force winds and waves. One of them, the *Ceylon*, survived a storm after running aground on a sandbar off Nantucket on April 8, 1837. Here is the account of the event told by Dorothy Wentworth in her definitive history of our town. "Her bilge was stove in and the seas that were breaking over her were such that they forced into the rigging where they spent the night. So superior was her construction that she held together until jacked up; then ways were constructed under her, repairs were made and the *Ceylon* was floated again in June. She proceeded to Boston under her own sail."

Duxbury's first church building was erected on what is now called the Old Burial Ground, the oldest cemetery in constant use in the entire U.S. Its location is marked by a granite slab, appropriately inscribed, that was erected in connection with Duxbury's 300th anniversary in 1937. This area and adjacent grounds with its military drilling land nearby and probably many commercial establishments was the religious, social and business center of the town for 150 years. The building was never called a church but a meeting house as were most New England buildings erected for worship in colonial times, to



When the late Rev. John Philbrick came to St. John's, it looked like this — with 2 doorways. Was one for men and the other for women?

So happy was Sprague with his new faith community and their just cause that he donated land and a sizable sum of money to build a church of their own, the present St. John's. Sprague pursued his religious and social goals becoming a leader in the Abolition movement until the regional Methodist conference refused to take a stand against slavery. In a dramatic move Sprague stood up before the congregation one Sunday, read his letter of resignation, stepped down to his pew and legend has it, nailed the church shut with 6 horseshoe nails, and stomping out of the building invited 11 loyal abolitionists to follow him. Fifty-eight of the assembled congregation did so. The remaining 17, after encountering locked doors the next few Sundays, adjourned to the Methodist center in Ashdod. This rebel group then

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which was a group of people totally under Diocesan jurisdiction. The rectory was then on Cedar St. where I remember meeting with my Boy Scout tenderfoot troop under the leadership of Richard Loring — later bishop of Springfield. Helen Philbrick tells wonderful stories of these early days of her and John's rectorship. One was the spring day they started worship in the church after the winter. The nave then sported 2 wood stoves, one on each side of the nave with long stove pipes reaching to the chimney at the far corner. As they opened the stove door, 24 flicker birds which had found shelter in the pipe, burst out upon them. Another was the practice of carrying water for the sacrament of Holy Baptism and for the Communion service. Helen found she was expected to carry a gallon jug of water for these purposes all the way from Cedar St. It got so heavy after a dozen trips she just rebelled and one Sunday after church she just ditched the jug behind the cable office and announced to John that she was through with this onerous task. Like any dutiful husband, John called the Duxbury Water Department on June 13, 1941 and running water was soon available in one corner of the building but the vestry were carried away and insisted that the sacristy doubled as a bathroom. Sisters of St. Margaret's called soon after this were amazed at this close juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural lives of St. John's people.

John and Helen worked so diligently that the mission received parish status in 1946. Around the mid-50s the parish house wing was built using money by the sale of the former parish house called Sprague Hall as down payment. It is now used as a residence by Charlotte and James Queeny. When I phoned Jim for input on this transaction he said the deal was beneficial to all parties but one tag end remained, namely a rectangular piece of ground to the right of Beaver Brook Rd., about 10 feet by 25 feet, "large enough," said Jim, "to provide a good burial plot."

At an early date the newly renovated and painted steeple will be consecrated and remind us all that this loyal congregation with its rector, Michael Marrone, with his gracious wife, Kittie, is very much in the Duxbury religious scene. I would like to close with a quote from Gershom Bradford's *History of the First Parish Church* for what he says about the construction of that building according to John Benedict our St. John's building committee chairman, can likewise apply to St. John's.

"The timbers of the present structure are of native growth, brought by merchants who had earned a

cent grounds with its military drilling land nearby and probably many commercial establishments was the religious, social and business center of the town for 150 years. The building was never called a church but a meeting house as were most New England buildings erected for worship in colonial times, to emphasize that they were free from any government except their own. The word "gathered" had a technical significance to clarify also the beliefs that this was not an institution as such but an invisible "body of believers" who read their Bible at home, taught the precepts revealed therein and sought to practice them in their lives. They then "gathered" on the Sabbath for common worship. The date given for the first such "gathering" is given as 1632. The date of Duxbury's "settlement" was about 6 years earlier in 1628. It was not until 1637 that Duxbury was able to secure the ministrations of a clergyman to satisfy the requirements of the General Court for incorporation. This first building was in all probability "multi-purpose" used for all sorts of community gatherings especially for what would later be called "town meetings."

The first meeting house was soon outgrown and a second was built nearby in 1707 (also marked by a Tercentenary granite slab) paid for by the sale of some common lands that had been allotted to the town by the great division of lands in 1627. And several years later (in 1787 to be exact) a third meeting house was built on Tremont St., near the geographical center of town. As prosperity began to be enjoyed through the burgeoning shipbuilding industry, this third building was torn down (its lumber was in part used to build a cottage opposite the present Bradford house about 200 yards down the road) and the present First Parish building erected on the same site. About this same time a town hall was constructed and Partridge Academy.

During all these years this was the only meeting house in town, its support and that of its several pastors, came from taxation. This continued until 1828. Going back a bit, Methodist circuit riders began coming to Duxbury, especially to Ashdod, some time around 1815. Records are sparse and often unreliable, but we do know that according to the "Story of Duxbury 1937," a newly organized Methodist Society built and dedicated a church building in 1832 which later moved to West Duxbury, dedicating a new edifice there in the then flourishing commercial, social and transportation center in West Duxbury in 1868. It was around this time that a Methodist Circuit rider from Scituate came to Duxbury Village. People at first met in their homes and then moved to an abandoned schoolhouse on what is now Chapel St. Being a non-liturgical fellowship there was little need for refurbishing and this valiant Christian band met here for several years for pleasant Sunday worship. They prospered as a reaction to the new Unitarian theology of the First Parish Church. It was here that one of Duxbury's leading citizens, Seth Sprague, was drawn and undoubtedly a conversion took place. It was not just a religious experience but issued in a new social passion particularly as regards to the issue of slavery.

church shut with 6 horseshoe nails, and stomping out of the building invited 11 loyal abolitionists to follow him. Fifty-eight of the assembled congregation did so. The remaining 17, after encountering locked doors the next few Sundays, adjourned to the Methodist center in Ashdod. This rebel group then began worship in an abandoned Union District schoolhouse No. 1 and remained there for several years, championing the double causes of temperance and abolition. Meanwhile the meeting house Seth had helped build stood idle and this congregation built the present Pilgrim Church in 1844.

Inquiring minds now focus around the question, "How then did this become the Episcopal Church of Duxbury?" The answer takes us back a bit.

First of all the religious landscape in New England around 1755 presented a hodgepodge of offspring from the mother church in England each with their own variety of conformity and dissent. A brief mention must be made of the effort of the crown to bring some kind of conformity to the religious scene by establishing a truly Anglican church in 1686 at King's Chapel. It was hoped to establish a state-sponsored church similar to that of Colonial Williamsburg. When the Revolution ended many Americans (estimates vary but it was close to 100,000) accepted the King's invitation to settle land in Nova Scotia, then including most of Eastern Canada from the Atlantic seaboard to the Great Lakes. This reduced Anglican worship to a very few scattered congregations all administered from a parish in Bristol, R.I. One bishop, Alexander Viles Griswold, was its leader in what was called the Eastern Diocese.

The first appearance of Anglican worship occurred about 1873 when the hitherto French-Atlantic cable office was taken over by the English and an Englishman named George Green began holding services in a radically renovated Union District schoolhouse. Some time later James Sanders rode horseback from Christ Church, Plymouth but the first official Episcopal service was conducted by the Rev. Gustave Zuckerman also from Plymouth on April 14, 1886. The former Methodist Church was bought by Lucy Sprague Sampson, Seth Sprague's granddaughter, in 1895, refurbished for Episcopal worship and consecrated by Bishop Lawrence on June 19, 1900. Seth Sprague's head house, willed by Seth to his grandson George, was given to the church in 1899 and served as a community building from that time on. Notable among its users was the U.S. Army in World War II, who according to Helen Philbrick, left it in a shambles.

The church building then was used by the fledgling Episcopal mission during the summers when I remember it well as its stalwart member Adeline Train Soule was my supporter going to Harvard. It was in the mid-30s that one of the summer residents of Duxbury fitted out the loft above the narthex for winter use as a chapel under the rectorship of the Rev. Allen Jacobs.

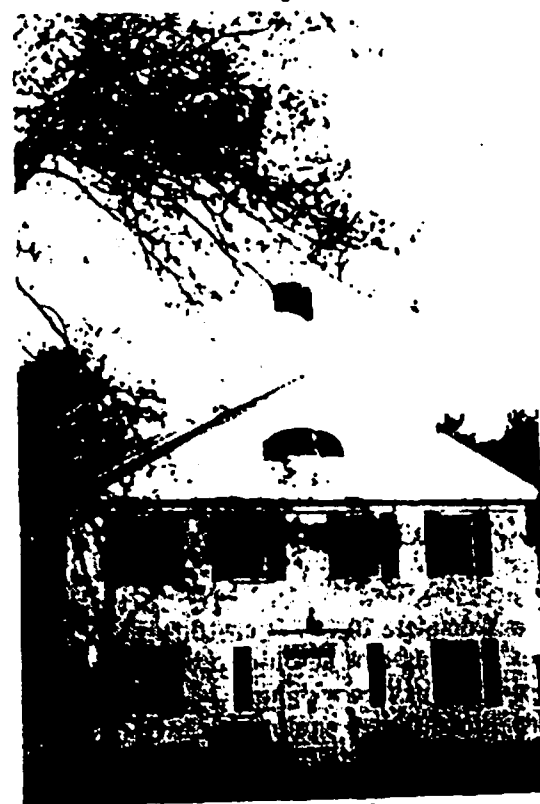
In 1939 the Rev. John Hatch Philbrick was called as vicar of the now organized mission to give it its correct canonical name as distinct from a mission

Parish Church for what he says about the construction of that building according to John Benedict our St. John's building committee chairman, can likewise apply to St. John's.

"The timbers of the present structure are of native pine, wrought by carpenters who had earned a reputation in the shipping world because of the fineness and thoroughness of their work. The construction of the building is today an example of their work. Being 86 feet long by 66 feet wide with side walls rising upward of 30 feet, it presented a problem to support the vast roof. The sturdy planners were in no way dismayed by the task before them. Many would have resorted to pillars but apparently our forefathers would have none of such architecture -- they desired and achieved a clear auditorium. This desire led to a remarkable system of hidden framing below the roof. The expansive walls are tied in by tremendous beams (9"x14"). Those timbers would otherwise have found their way into the construction of great ships...What a noble grove of ancient pines supplied this higher need..."

I climbed up to the attic to check on this magnificent achievement in wood construction and as I stood

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The church today, with ramp for the handicapped.
Photo by Deni Johnson

ST JOHN'S CHURCH

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on the rough platform I could not help admiring this craftsmanship and realizing what a privilege it is to live in a community that enjoys the benefits of such a heritage.

I have this St. John story from the Rev. James Williamson:

Although Lucy Sprague is not so described in church records, she was, so to speak, the Dowager Saint of St. John's, retaining her membership here long after she had moved to Beacon Hill in Boston. She found congenial worship at St. John's Bowdoin

St., run by the Cowley Fathers and became a devout Anglo-Catholic, inviting these clergy to minister at St. John's for several years in the early days. She also left a request that she be buried from St. John's.

On the day she was buried after living well into her 90's, the sky was darkened and storms threatened. And just as Bishop Lawrence was leading the pall bearers from the church door to the hearse, the storm broke with a resounding thunderbolt and several flashes of lightning. As soon as the sound subsided the Bishop turned to the mourners and said, "Don't be alarmed by this outburst of nature. It is Lucy's final protest - you know she always wanted St. John's to be a stone church."

Plimoth Plantation Events

Plimoth Plantation is the living museum of 17th century Plymouth. Its primary exhibits are the 1627 Pilgrim Village, the Wampanoag Indian Settlement, and the full-scale reproduction *Mayflower II*. Located on Warren Ave. (Rte. 3A), 3 miles south of Plymouth center, the museum is open daily 9-5, April 1 to Nov. 30.

Nov. 15: Nature Walk. Explore the woods, fields and Eel River Estuary of Plimoth Plantation as your staff guide describes the plants native to the region. 1 pm, Visitor Center, included with admission.

Nov. 16: Native American Storytelling. Warm yourself with cider and cookies at the fireside, as you share in tales from the rich tribal traditions of the Wampanoag people and their neighbors. 2 pm, Visitor Center, fee.

Nov. 17: Thanksgiving Cooking Workshop. Add a 17th-century recipe to your Thanksgiving feast as

you learn to prepare Native American and English dishes. 7-9 pm, Visitor Center.

Nov. 18: Tape Loom Weaving Workshop. Under the guidance of instructor Miriam Dolloff Chealey, learn how to use a tape loom and weave 17th-century style tapes, the ribbons used for clothing construction and decoration. 10-2. Visitor Center, fee.

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